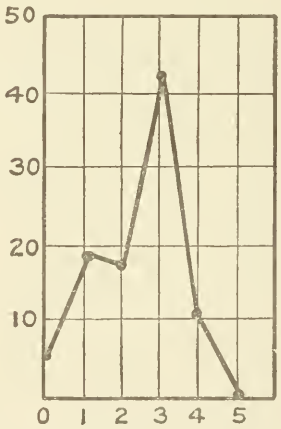
XXIV.—*Letters, Extracts, and Notes.*

Cuckoos' Eggs.

Sir,—Will you allow me to make one or two remarks on Major Meiklejohn's very interesting paper on the "Breeding-habits of the Cuckoo" in 'The Ibis.' In 'Wild Life' (vol. i. no. 5, May 1913) some data were published by E. Pettit. I have plotted a curve of some of Mr. Pettit's records (a liberty I hope he will pardon). The figures relate to the occurrence of Cuckoos in Reed-Warblers' nests, and the abscissæ refer



The occurrence of Cuckoos' eggs in nests of the Reed-Warbler recorded by E. Pettit, in 'Wild Life,' May 1913.
The abscissæ = number of eggs in foster clutch. In each case there was only one Cuckoo's egg in nest.

to the number of foster eggs. The high mode may probably be accounted for, as the normal clutch of a Reed-Warbler's nest is four, by the Cuckoo ejecting one of the foster eggs. It is more difficult to explain the "shelf" between 1 and 2, as if the matter were due simply to chance, and the Cuckoo's custom was to throw out a foster egg when she deposited her own, the curve ought to rise gradually to the mode. The rise between 0 and 1 looks as if the Cuckoo

does not eject the foster egg when she is dealing with a nest that already contains one only. Unfortunately we have no knowledge of the state of incubation in any of these cases, and so cannot tell which are unfinished clutches and which are those despoiled by the laying Cuckoo.

Major Meiklejohn does not refer to Mr. O. Latter's tables published a few years ago in 'Biometrika.' I have not access to these at present, but I believe it was shown there that the relation in size between parasite and host-egg though small is constant, whereas relation in colour is not. Major Meiklejohn admits that the colour-resemblance has been greatly overrated; but on page 207 he postulates that there is considerable selection by the foster-parents. Yet in this country, where the Hedge-Sparrow is so commonly parasitised, the Cuckoo never lays a blue egg. We cannot explain this by calling it the Cuckoo's "instinct," because it is the instinct that we are out to explain. In Germany and Finland, where the blue type of egg is produced, it is laid in the nest of the Redstart. But if these Redstarts breed in closed situations as the British Redstarts do, it must very often be impossible for either bird to distinguish the colour of the eggs. As to the view on page 207 that it is "unlikely" that the male may influence the coloration, surely in our present knowledge it is unsafe to say which traits go by one sex or the other. The egg pigments are products of a certain kind of metabolism in the parent, and as we know that the father may profoundly influence the metabolism of his female offspring in other ways, I cannot agree that it is "unlikely" that he does so in this. If he does have such an influence, there would be a constant tendency for the different "gentes" of Cuckoos to break up owing to intercrossing. What are required are figures from a district where only one type of egg is found, showing what is the commonest foster-parent and what percentage of eggs are laid in other nests. We also badly need records of nests *that are deserted* owing to parasitism by a Cuckoo. The chief criticism that one could make of Major Meiklejohn's important suggestion that the egg may be carried to the

nest some days after laying, is that it postulates considerable memory for the Cuckoo; but, after all, the possession of such a faculty would not be more remarkable than the fact that two Cuckoo's eggs so rarely occur in the same nest, for if the bird can remember not to lay twice in the same place, why should she not remember where to put her egg the day after laying?

Regarding Major Meiklejohn's remarks on the subsequent interest of the Cuckoo in her egg, one might perhaps make the criticisms that in the first case the Cuckoo inspecting the nest may not have been the same bird. In that of the White Wagtail there is no evidence that the young Cuckoo, failing to eject the young, did not smother them, and that they were then, as sometimes happened, removed by their own parents. Finally, may not the last instance be explained by supposing that the presence of an egg, even though not her own, excited the Hedge-Sparrow to incubate? Normally the stimulus to incubation seems to be internal—from the genital organs probably; but as I have known a Greenfinch, and also a Twite, begin to sit on their first egg and lay others subsequently, I believe that abnormally the stimulus may be external, and be due possibly to the sensation of eggs under the breast.

Yours faithfully,

London Unit S.W.H.
Odessa.
May 15, 1917.

Maud D. Haviland,
H.M.B.O.U.

Sir,—In Major Meiklejohn's valuable article on the "Breeding-habits of the Cuckoo" he quotes Dr. Rey (p. 193) as asserting that eggs laid in the nest of *Accentor modularis* apparently never resemble those of the foster-parent. Again (p. 202) he states on his own authority:—"In Britain the Hedge-Sparrow is frequently selected as foster-parent, and the eggs are, as a rule, successfully hatched. Yet Cuckoos' eggs found in the nests of this species are never blue."

When selecting varieties of eggs for illustration in

'British Birds with their Nests and Eggs,' Mr. Frohawk and I set aside from our own and other collections no less than twenty-one eggs of *Cuculus canorus* ; of these the only blue egg was one from Mr. A. B. Farn's collection, expressly stated to have been found in the nest of the Hedge-Sparrow. Mr. William Borrer, of Cowfold, Sussex (with whom I was in correspondence when writing that portion of the work), unless I am very much mistaken, also obtained the blue variety from an Accentor's nest : unfortunately I did not retain the letters which he wrote to me on the subject.

An egg which I found in June 1880 in a Robin's nest was an admirable copy of the eggs of the foster-parent, excepting in the more sharply-defined spotting, a few indistinct lilacine shell-spots and the black dots characteristic of many Cuckoos' eggs. Now, considering how very abundant and easy to discover Robins' nests are, I see no reason why reddish Cuckoos' eggs should be rare.

I quite agree with Major Meiklejohn in rejecting the view that the colouring of Cuckoos' eggs is affected by the food supplied by their foster-parents, and not only for the excellent reason which he gives, but also because so many of the foster-parents supply practically the same food. Of course, we know that Robins, Accentors, Larks, and Pipits eat a good deal of seed, but I do not believe they ever give it to their nestlings, and even the more insectivorous Finches probably feed their young at first only upon half-digested and regurgitated insects and later upon the same food as captured.

That characteristically coloured Cuckoos' eggs are not always found in appropriate nests will be evident to anyone who examines plate viii. of the eggs in vol. ii. of 'British Birds.' Fig. 271 would have been less conspicuous in a Rock-Pipit's nest than a Robin's, whereas fig. 272 is palpably intended for the nest of a Chaffinch and not that of a Rock-Pipit ; 299 also is far more characteristic of a Chaffinch than a Hedge-Accentor ; but I do not doubt that if suitable nests had been available, none of these eggs would have been misplaced, for there is strong evidence

that, when convenient, a Cuckoo prefers always to lay her entire clutch in nests of one selected species.

There is such an extraordinary range of variation in eggs of the same species that it is not surprising that the Cuckoo is no exception to the rule; the only puzzling thing, is that some Cuckoos' eggs are such perfect, slightly enlarged, replicas of the eggs of the other species that one can hardly suppose the resemblance to be objectless; and yet many birds seem to have so little appreciation of the character of their own eggs that they readily accept marbles or hazel-nuts as substitutes, and I have even known a Blackbird to accept a rather angular flint and attempt to hatch it out.

Yours truly,

Beckenham, Kent.
13 April, 1917.

ARTHUR G. BUTLER.

SIR,—In the list of species breeding in England in whose nests the eggs of the Cuckoo have been found (p. 222 *ante*), Major Meiklejohn does not mention the Reed-Bunting. The late John Cottney took several clutches of Reed-Bunting's eggs containing an egg of the Cuckoo in this neighbourhood, one of which is in my collection, and I believe there are one or two others in his collection now in the Belfast Municipal Museum.

Yours truly,

Hillsborough,
Co. Down.
16 April, 1917.

NEVIN H. FOSTER.

SIR,—I read with interest "Some Reflections on the Breeding-habits of the Cuckoo" by Major R. F. Meiklejohn, D.S.O., M.B.O.U., in your April number. There are, however, certain points in his paper to which I should like to call attention, and on which I should be glad of further information.

I wish to deal with *facts* as apart from *theories*. Personally I am a great deal more interested in the former than the latter.

Now, under a sub-heading — "The authentic facts known"—in section (*c*) I notice the following statement:— The foster-parents "continue to feed it (the Cuckoo) for some time after it has left the nest, and, owing to its size, often have to do so by perching on its *head*." I have had intimate dealings with more than one Cuckoo at this stage in its existence, but I have never yet seen either foster-parent perch on the baby's *head*. I have seen them perch on the young Cuckoo's back, and indeed on its breast. In this latter case the head and neck of the Cuckoo were thrown right back, thus providing a resting-place for the foster-parent's feet. This position of alighting I have only once observed, and I was lucky in obtaining a photograph of it.

Now, does the foster-parent ever perch on the *head* of the Cuckoo? According to Major Meiklejohn it is an authentic fact that it does. What I am not clear about is whether by *head* he refers to the position somewhere *on* and above the Cuckoo. If the baby had its foster-mother perched on its head, it seems to me that the act of feeding would be a most difficult one, and perhaps impossible. I merely wish for information on the above point, which is of some interest.

May I further be allowed to call attention to a later statement in the same article p. 219?:—"Of these latter, the first four birds (Wren, Willow-Warbler, Wood-Warbler, Chiffchaff) invariably refuse to hatch the Cuckoo's egg." This may be true of the last three species named above, but is certainly untrue of the Wren. There is a well-known photograph by the late Colonel Moore, which shows a baby Cuckoo being fed in the nest of a Wren. This photograph has been reproduced in 'Wild Life,' and may be seen on p. 297, vol. i. no. 5, May 1913.

It seems rather dangerous to state as a "*fact*" that certain species "*invariably*" refuse to hatch the Cuckoo's egg. Such a number of things take place in nature behind our backs that sweeping statements are often upset by our friends. I should like very much to try the effect of placing Cuckoos' eggs in a number of Willow-Warblers' nests and

see what the effect would be. Would the eggs in each case be ejected or fail to hatch? I cannot help doubting it! Perhaps some day one might try the experiment. I shall certainly tell you all about it if I do!

With many apologies for taking up so much of your space,

Yours truly,

A. M. C. Nicholl.

Royal Naval College,
Osborne, Isle of Wight.
20 May, 1917.

Lanner Falcon in North Lancashire.

Sir,—I can find no record in any modern work of the Lanner Falcon (*Falco feldeggi*) which I recorded in 'The Field' of January 30, 1904, as having been picked up dead on Carnforth Marsh, north Lancashire, on April 26, 1902. I think it worthy of mention at least in the appendix of the last published B. O. U. list.

There was no doubt about the identification, for I showed it to Dr. W. Eagle Clarke, who pronounced it to be a Lanner. The bird, a female, was seen in the district for some weeks, during which time several men tried to shoot it, and eventually it was picked up dead by the present owner, and almost warm, having a recent shot-wound beneath the wing. During its residence on the marsh, it appeared to live chiefly on small waders. I advertised the find pretty freely among Falconers, but did not receive a single reply that one was missing. It is the only record for the British Isles, and I venture to think as worthy of publication in the appendix of the last B. O. U. list as many of those mentioned there, if not more so than some of them.

Yours truly,

H. W. Robinson.

Patchetts, Caton,
nr. Lancaster.
7 May, 1917.

Selous Memorial Committee.

With this Number is enclosed a Circular from the Committee formed to establish a National Memorial to the late Captain Selous, D.S.O., explaining the form which it is proposed the memorial will take and asking for subscriptions.

All Members of the Union who wish to contribute to so worthy an object are asked to send their subscriptions to C. E. Fagan, Esq., Honorary Treasurer, Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road, London, S.W. 7.

The Berlepsch Collection of Birds.

We learn from a notice in the 'Ornithologische Monatsberichte' of last year (p. 64) that this extremely valuable collection, chiefly of Neotropical birds, brought together by the late Hans Graf von Berlepsch, containing many types and varieties and including a wonderful series of Trochilidæ mounted and in skin, has been acquired by the Senckenberg Museum at Frankfort a. M. It contains over 55,000 skins and 300 of the Berlepsch types.

The Journal of the Natural History Society of Siam.

Messrs. Witherby & Co. have been appointed European Agents for this publication. The work is illustrated by plates and figures, and deals with all branches of the Natural History of that country.

List of M.B.O.U. serving with H.M. Forces.

The name of Mr. Thomas Carter, Pte. 9th Batt. Surrey Volunteer Regt., must be added to those already published.

Errata in the April Number of 'The Ibis.'

p. 158, lines 1 & 2,	for *carruca*	read *curruca*.
p. 162, line 22,	*for* Pl. V.	*read* Pl. IV.
p. 180, lines 29 & 30,	for *carbo*	read *carlo*.
p. 261, line 31,	*for* Cork	*read* Belfast.
p. 272, line 29,	*for* H. R. Jourdain	*read* F. C. R. Jourdain.

B.O.U. New Guinea Expedition.

The Official Records of the collections made by the B.O.U. Expedition to Dutch New Guinea have now been published and form two handsome quarto volumes, illustrated by 41 plates.

We would draw the attention of our readers to the advertisement of this work on p. 2 of the cover of the present number of 'The Ibis.'

Application should be made to Mr. Francis Edwards, Bookseller, 83 *a* High Street, Marylebone, W. The price is £10 net.